An Anatomy of Terror by Andrew Sinclair.  Macmillan 2003.

At a time when we seem to be obsessed with terrorism, terrorists, and the impact of terrorist acts, Andrew Sinclair's latest book, subtitled A History of Terrorism, could hardly have been published at a better moment.

The journey that Sinclair makes in An Anatomy of Terror follows terrorism from its early days in the ancient world, tracing it through every historical period up to and including the attack by Al Qaeda on the World Trade Center in New York City.

Each chapter focuses on a terrorist group or cult, including the Assassins, the Thuggee, Irish republicans and others, and Sinclair explains their origins and modus operandi, as well as their desired aims.

The approach that Sinclair takes in this eminently readable book might be said to be firmly to the left of centre, and as such he sometimes appears to sympathise with the terrorists and to seek to contextualise why they took the steps they did; at times this is acceptable at others it can be irritating, though it is hard to say whether the writer means everything that he writes or couches his approach in language that is designed to provoke the reader and stimulate debate.

In his penultimate chapter Andrew Sinclair sets out ten principles or general conclusions on terror, each heading followed by a short paragraph of explanation.  These principles include Terror is warfare by extreme means, Terror is the weapon of the outlaw against the oppressor, If we are terrorized we may become terrible to those we fear.

In spite of its necessary superficiality, An Anatomy of Terror will be an excellent introduction for many readers to the subject of terrorism set in its historical context, as well as being a source of argument and much-needed debate.

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